4. I want to meet you as a person

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“My heart was a storm in me as I went.”
—Homer

In Kierkegaard and in the Enlightenment

I want to talk to you about freedom, freedom through self-reflection, and through this topic, I want to talk to you about what would be called “idealism” if it were not more simply imperfect, committed love. The way I want to approach this constellation of topics is through the morose, mentally ill writer and philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, who hardly survived—and then only until middle age—the abuse of his father and the genetics of his mind. He seems a strange choice. Since Isaiah Berlin (1997), Kierkegaard has been categorized as a counter-Enlightenment figure. But I want to ask a transformative question about him: What if Kierkegaard were instead an enlightenment writer who had surpassed the anti-authoritarianism of the Enlightenment and was instead interested in human deepening and maturity? This is not the way I want to talk about Søren Kierkegaard, whom I never knew, but who somehow managed—through his writing and the effort I put into reading it—to be a good teacher. As all good teachers, he did
what anyone given momentary authority in another’s mind should do: he erased it, gave it up, did whatever he could to become irrelevant once the lesson became self-seen, self-taught. In fact, he took no credit at all: it was grace, it was me; no, not me; it was “life” — it was the reality of what I’d just seen as an intimate part of my life. I would like to talk about people like this as distant family, not as objects of academic inquiry.

A question about a historical moment and its relation to a cultural tradition may seem a dry question to ask, while the questions of love, self-reflection and freedom are real and interesting. Nevertheless, in this talk, I want to propose an interpretation of Kierkegaard’s work under which he continues the Enlightenment, rather than discontinuing it, and in so doing, I want to explain how his version of Enlightenment self-reflection complicates the maturity involved in exercising one’s own understanding. Kierkegaard complicated and developed one of the most central aspects of enlightenment, at least as Kant and the subsequent tradition has defined it. Kierkegaard was an enlightenment thinker (lower case “e”!). And therefore it is misleading to see him as opposed to the heart of the Enlightenment (upper case “E”). It is strange to think that he would be concerned with any of these historical distinctions. He seemed to want to meet people as people and to work their relationship out slowly with them. When I think of the way he deflected his lost marriage into an impossible intimacy he projected through his writing, I feel sad for him. His was a strange life. It reminds me too much of myself.

The Enlightenment — capital “E” — was a historical period. In it, so-called Aufklärers challenged people to become responsible authorities in their own lives, especially concerning matters ethical, political and religious. The key to this internalization of responsibility was considered to be the advancement of one’s own understanding. People had to become connected to their
own capacity to know. According to Kant, this move-
ment from accepting external authorities to using our
own understanding was enlightenment—lower case
“e.” The imperative beginning Kant’s essay “What Is
Enlightenment?” (1996, 58) reads: “Have the courage to
use our own understanding!” This is an elegant restate-
ment of the central message of Rousseau’s “Profession
of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” in Émile (1978). Seen in
this light, the tradition of enlightenment—lower case
“e”—began as a tradition of self-determination exer-
cised through our capacity to understand independently
enough to own what we each believe, that is, to assert
oneself.

This tradition was fundamental to our democratic
culture, whether in the form of declarations of indepen-
dence or in proclamations of human rights. The notion
of asserting oneself is basic to democracy, because only
in it do we each have a separate voice. On the reading
of Foucault two centuries later, what the Enlightenment
promoted philosophically was a self-culture found pre-
cisely where we displace convention’s authority enough
to assess what we each believe ourselves. This was an
ethos, a style of living. Foucault thought that the practice
of enlightenment—lower case “e”—expressed an anti-
authoritarian ethos by seeking to test the limits of what
was considered possible in being normal. Foucault’s his-
torical analysis of the normal was a way of showing us
heteronomy. Here was a commitment to open up the
world to a plurality of voices and of intelligences and to
expose the fact that norms always depend on consent—
that much that is normal is not normative. I went into
the academy to create with people and to understand. I
think Kierkegaard preserved the personal and buffered
me from the academic market’s competition. He made
me long for relationships. And I also started to wonder:
could something other than theory be at the core of aca-
demic knowing? What was philosophy, most humanly?
Was it really just theory?
Foucault’s insight was to show time and again how systems of authority people take to be self-evident are normalizations of what could be otherwise. He showed how anti-authoritarian resistance could be joined with thinking the present as a set of historically contingent conditions on our self-conception—the limits of our possibility. And so Foucault (1996a) called “critique” the movement of authority to the side of what we take to be normal in the interest of pulverizing the norms that oppressed the real trajectory of bodies and sentiments between people when people are trying to grow up and to be free. Critique was an exercise of distancing oneself from the compulsions of the historical conditions that make us accept our self-conception automatically. Critique carved out a space where we could take distance on the automatic intimidation of norms. The brilliant move on Foucault’s part was to see critical attitude as room around our practices by virtue of first beginning to see their contingency. Could they be otherwise? Here was the ironist’s art. Thinking about Foucault and about Kierkegaard makes me think about my marriage. The process of realizing that I could not keep the oath I’d taken involved seeing the contingency of marriage norms and demanded that I be intimate with myself in a way I never had been before.

Foucault’s picture underlined a point tacit in Kant and in especially the Rousseau of the Second Discourse. The standard textbook picture of the Enlightenment casts it as a critique of external authority—religion and monarchy—but may neglect to emphasize the purpose of this critique: to move the locus of authority to how we make sense of the world. We, you, I, he, she can ask:

Does this [claim, situation, relationship, practice, social form, even system of authority] make sense to me or to us? Does it work for me or for us? Does the “me” or “us” that we find ourselves stuck with work for us and make sense to us?
This is so very much like a relationship. We have to get space around our practices, first by seeing the contingency of their norms. Systems of authority, by virtue of appealing to authority, always have a space around them by which they can be questioned. The problem is often, historically, that there is fear or shame in doing so. They are always open to question, but a shadow morality guards them in our emotions. This fear lives in the body, the site of our most personal memories. It lives in fear-voice. In our emotions, our self-conception—the very “I” that questions authority—is likely to be positioned by norms we have not interrogated historically. What we ultimately fear in questioning authority isn’t just its reprisals or control, but also the loss of our selves we mistakenly think will occur by being abnormal. The normal resists being interrogated by being self-evident, if I may put it like that.

What is it to exercise your own understanding, when you have taken space on “yourself”—and you feel those scare-quotes? What is it to have something agree with your understanding when you can’t trust your emotions? Also—and this question is very hard to wrap one’s mind around—is there a space on yourself that isn’t simply itself an automatic construction of the historical problem of the Enlightenment, a problem where authority is in crisis and our minds cannot be trusted at first?1 Is there a leave-taking of authority that is life-affirming and free?

The interesting possibility, I think, is to consider something Foucault did not address. What space can move our inherited authorities, not recreating them, but unsettling them once they have come into view in half light, now crossed by the shadow of a doubt? Where does the unsettling of history arise? This is tantamount to asking,

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what unsettles norms and gives us the impulse to reconsider reasons? It is not enough to see that they are contingent. They must also be unfulfilling—they must jar with the sense of what is possible in a fulfilling human life. **It hurts to think about it.**

But then we will reconsider sense itself, the condition of our home. When fulfillment has been determined by the normal, abnormality seems anathema. To reject the normal out of un-fulfillment with it is to threaten our sense of life itself. That very sense of what is possible in a fulfilling human life is split in two and acts against our inherited sense of propriety. The threat is felt as a collapse of our world just as much as of a loss of self. We have to learn to lose to leave an authority.

In a dream, you came to me, although we have not talked in a decade. You asked me if I knew that, despite everything that happened, our time together was important to you, that you had loved me, and that I had been a part of your life. I do not have enough dreams like this.

I find Kierkegaard helpful here, because of the trace of body in his sense of virtue. Especially as the questions I’ve been asking become emotional, they blur the boundaries between the Enlightenment and its so-called opposition in Romanticism. And if we focus on the purpose of critique, we emerge with a view of the core of the Enlightenment that is, technically speaking, no different than what Husserl inaugurated when he claimed phenomenology as a rigorous science brackets claims to authority that have not been shown to make sense to our minds.² We emerge with a view that places Kierkegaard within the Enlightenment tradition. Here, then, would be a tradition running from the Enlightenment through

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Romanticism into twentieth century phenomenology. In it, we would attend to the body as an expressive space. The emotional body would hold open a way of becoming that could act out against norms in a refusal that allows one to re-orient ourselves to them. The body as intelligent flesh could throw off the constructing mind. Fear could give way to freedom. This would not be to separate body from mind, but to see them as modes of one, unified consciousness that exists dynamically, and it would be to look for an emotional location within the body that counteracts fear and anxiety about being abnormal.

What would such an emotional location be? Kierkegaard was aware of the body-memory of freedom, which he understood through the experience of love. Love involves a particular emotional nexus that can best be described as the rich and multi-dimensional experience of arriving home, in a true home. Love in this way is eco-locational. Its memory lodges within the body as a

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3 What of psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century? The standard picture would make it the opposition to an Enlightenment legacy through its construction of the concept of the unconscious and the unconscious’s subversion of our claim to authority. So the story goes, our unconscious acts like the authority, whether we recognize it or not.

But this story is confused, on multiple grounds. First, the unconscious does not present itself as any authority. Rather, it throws the category of authority into question by suggesting we act on the basis of experiences that are so buried as to not even be considerations, let alone reasons. Still, this correction would only strengthen the anti-Enlightenment story, once revised. But, second, what psychoanalysis classically understood does is to surface the unconscious as a cast of mind that, when one sees how it has set in, actually does have reasons. The surfacing not only brings these reasons out so that they first become reasons to us for the first time, but it also allows us to evaluate them. Seeing the reasons we’ve acted on without previously taking them as reasons, we can now come to terms with our irrationality or have sympathy for the way we were being, in a strange way, rational. But such a process develops authority over our actual, not idealized, lives. So it only deepens the Enlightenment aim.
counter-action against anxiety and fear that at the same time involves freedom without the pressure of conformity. It is too rich for conformity; feeling loved loosens the pressure of conformity as growth loosens past fixations. The issue is no longer about being normal or abnormal, but about being a person — and this gives one space to think and to be, to decide on norms that make sense. It is hard to break out of the adolescent cycle of the Enlightenment — one in which Foucault largely remained — but it can be done. Enlightenment — lower case “e” — is after all about growing up. It seeks a kind of maturity we have only anticipated.

Here, Kierkegaard surpassed current conceptions of body memory as a kind of practical capacity. Academics has for too long been focused on the relation between theory and practice, without considering the relation between person and person. The relation between people is neither merely theoretical nor merely practical, nor merely both. It isn’t enough to know lots about you or to know how to manipulate you to be your friend or even simply your fellow human being! The interpersonal space is neither objectifying nor calculative. And the question is how to understand this. Kierkegaard had a way. For him, more than anything, the body’s memory is a kind of relational, not simply practical, capacity. The body is interpersonal. In us is memory of me before or beside the authorized me, of you, before and beside the authorized you, of us, before and beside the authorized us, of unique persons. The pre-personal impulse to relate clears the way to reformulating relationships. He called this love’s ground. It was an original source to humane life. The body-memory of love challenges any norms held between us as to whether they rest in intimate attention to our uniqueness and support us in growth and in fulfillment.

How can philosophical writing locate such an emotional center in people — that is, help us locate ourselves outside norms in a space of personal consideration?
Perhaps we can simply say that Kierkegaard provoked. But what is provocation? Is it simply offense or debate as eighteenth century Aufklärers—even sometimes Rousseau—seemed to believe? Is that how we speak with each other? No: provocation is a mode of interpersonal address. It is something other than debate. That the Enlightenment—capital “E”—did not understand this was its adolescent stance, and it is a stance that still grips intellectual culture to such an extent that we cannot effectively say we have left adolescent reactivity with it. I think of my graduate school, and I shudder.

Provocation employs what Jean-Louis Chrétien (1990) calls “the bare voice.” Writing from a position of interpersonal address, Kierkegaard provoked his readers to relate to themselves as real people who matter, who have lives of their own and who deserve love. He located the clumsy vulnerability in seeking to relate—not to theorize, not to manipulate the world to achieve our ends, but to find a home with others. The vulnerability was grounded in the body’s way of moving us beyond our consciousness through attachment to the people outside us who, though shaped normatively, are more real than norms and are centers of freedom who decide on norms. Here was a space introduced into history relationally by way of making authority lose its sting and become responsible to humane reality.4 Humane reality is a relationship. I think of the times when all I wanted was for us to speak. There was no way to, however. Battles circulated everywhere in the space of your mind, and I could not address them without you feeling rejected by reasoning. The shame inside you was so intense. The emotions were trapped there, large and terrifying. Then you would flee or lash out, or try to fuse with someone—approximating the memory of home, a home that you never had as an abused child.

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And here was I, afraid of conflict from my own childhood, and, in the beginning, too easily re-traumatized myself, wanting to fix everything, losing myself in the mess and then being frustrated and mad.

I believe Kierkegaard’s work of voicing expresses—and indirectly indicates—a bodily intelligence that is thoroughly interpersonal. His doing so isn’t simply an attempt to bring emotion into thought, as a hackneyed Romantic interpretation would have it. It’s an attempt to show how the body is already interpersonal and in that relatedness, free.

Landscape of you, of me before and beside me, of us, beside the authorized or scripted us, of the vibrant tendrils of the day in blue and water. There is a garden. It is outside history. Dust erodes the edges, the edges of categories blown into it. It isn’t heard or seen. Right now, it is soft as grass.

Trauma in a room of notes.

Growing up by using your own understanding

It is worth circling back to what Kant wrote about enlightenment—lower case “e”—in order to see how Kierkegaard improved on it. Kant defines enlightenment as the exit from “self-incurred immaturity” (1996, 58). What is maturity, and how do Kierkegaard’s invocations continue and deepen it?

The thesis I am interested in is that maturity is a personal and interpersonal deepening. In other words, it is guided by relational reason more so than by theoretical

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5 On the overall emphasis of Kant’s work as work in growing up, see Susan Neiman, The Unity of Reason, Rereading Kant (1994, 5.v) and Why Grow Up? (2014). Neiman, who was a Rawls and Cavell student, has understood well the personal dimension of both a sense of justice and the claim of reason. See especially her Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-up Idealists (2008).
or practical reason, which fall in behind our personal growth. In other words, to become mature is to become more of a person, and in that a subject of beliefs and an agent of intentions all guided by personal understanding. If this thesis is right, then it suggests that:

The primary area of enlightenment is actually in relationships between people and in our self-relationships by which we collect ourselves around being a person. Thus, love—not objectifying or object-pursuing reason—is the center of human reason.

These conclusions would align the Enlightenment virtue of humanity with love and relationship. Kierkegaard, I think, understood these points very well.

But did Kant? To answer this question, we’d need to begin by imagining what “self-incurred immaturity” could be. Kant’s metaphor of being a “machine” helps (1996, 64). Kant contrasts maturity with the self-incurred immaturity of people who let themselves be treated or seen as “machines.” It is an odd image, perhaps characteristic of the mechanism of the age that saw the universe as a giant clock and animals as machines that make noise. What is at stake in claiming that we are more than machines?

A machine is a tool that is constructed so as to carry out tasks for others. Mindless, it receives its program from without. It carries out the will of its user within the parameters of its capacity. For Kant, humans are more than machines, because we can judge for ourselves what we should do. To suppress this capacity when we have it is immature.

The body isn’t a machine. Machines dream of body-machines, self-organizing, nano-technological complexities evolving as bodies do. Norms are machinic in so far as they limit the impulse of bodies. Bodies are impulses, machines are expulsions of swerve, anti-querian. Of course a machine could continue the impulse of bodies,
but then it would not be a machine. In the metaphor Kant used, we are already industrial. Our bodies allergic without knowing it, sifting to the side like sand, sprouting as grass.

To me, when you acted out of your abuse, you were never a machine. You were a weapon sent by your father and now focused through you in a repetition of a habit so traumatic you could not see that it was supplanting the possibility of home with the traumatized familiarity of a volatile space.

I repetitively responded, repeating my own familiarity with a volatilized and traumatic environment. In Tarkovsky’s Nostalghia, the poet/biographer tells a story while standing soaked & drunk in the ruin of the church of angels half submerged in water:

“A man goes by another man who is stuck in the swamp, seemingly sinking.

“He pulls the man out.

“You idiot!,” cries the man. ‘I live there!’”

So Kant is underlining agency grounded in subjectivity, the power to determine ourselves by what we believe without accepting a program from without. You can see how Foucault was developing just this thought. The entire critique of the normal is intended to open a space for subjectivity-grounded agency in this Kantian sense. But I think that Kant—and so Foucault—did not go far enough with the implications of rejecting a mechanical view of people. After all, the main way a person is not a machine is that a machine cannot love. And if what we called a machine did love, it would no longer be merely a machine—it would become a persona. Machines qua machines and not persons lack the freedom of withholding themselves and the commitment to grow together outside of what any program or use could expect. The heart of love is that it is not a program and is not a tool. Any relationship that is a program or merely a tool eventually breaks—as so many marriages do. Relationships require that we give ourselves to each
other and grow together, without a program and without using the other person. These qualities are found in the body, even in the hug, the embrace and the body language that frees us up to be together and makes us feel that we have the space and even the impulse to be who we are and to risk growing. The minute a machine could show affection of this sort, it would become a persona.

The way I would like to put this, then, is that “immaturity” is a pattern of world adopted without it being personal to you, without it being loving and part of your love. Immaturity is not living in or seeking a true home. What you say you think and believe does not really make sense to you. What you feel does not feel loving to you. You walk about in a world of mysterious norms. You feel impersonal or depersonalized. The norms program you and you basically just go along for the ride or submit. You are a machine. You are homeless inside yourself. Maturity, by contrast, is fundamentally nostos⁶—seeking to make a home whenever we are alienated from one. I have felt this way—alienated from home—so often as an academic in conferences like this one where people are pushed through a compressed time and an anonymous space to listen to bits of theory and to consider some practical applications while relating to each other calculatively. Only my friends at conferences have kept the personal alive. It is weird how, after you & me, I see abuse everywhere now in our most normal institutions.

The point I am making is that maturity is deeply personal. This is the consequence of rejecting a mechanistic view of each other. Being personal, maturity depends on the solitary and the social—in relations to oneself that collect one as a person and in interpersonal relationships that we have with each other and which, in

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⁶ The first part of nostalgia, which means literally the pain of home-seeking. Nostos is the home-seeking itself. Cf. Sarah Gridley, “Nostos poetics as eco-poetics” (2016).
assuming a life of their own, give us the space to be and to grow. I call this a “home.” Kierkegaard would seem to be a leading enlightenment figure at this point.

There is more, though. Kant puts the cause of self-incurred immaturity in “laziness or cowardice”—in lack of guts (1996, 58). This leads me to wonder, what kind of courage is called for when we become persons? What is the courage proper to loving? A piece of driftwood settles out along the lake not far from the garden split by a cloud and ruffling in cold light. I hold it in your hands and know that everything is clinging to it. My tremor is gone when you run your palm over smoothness.

It is with this question that I turn to Kierkegaard. I think Kierkegaard understood what it is to be called to responsibility by being addressed as a person. He understood that the kind of courage required by love is the courage to show yourself and to give yourself. Both of which are really hard if you have been abused. Fifty-nine years after Kant wrote “What is enlightenment?,” Kierkegaard’s first pseudonymous work ended with the following:

> Ask yourself and keep on asking until you find the answer. For you may have known something many times, acknowledged it; may have willed something many times, attempted it — still. Only the deep inner motion, only your heart’s indescribable emotion, only that will show you that something actually makes sense to you. Then no force can take that from you. Only the truth that grows with you is truth to you.  

This famous passage assumes a wide space around an unsettled understanding, a missing authority, the decision to find it oneself. Addressing the reader’s body,

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the passage validates that what moves emotionally up through the reader’s chest is where her understanding begins. In so doing, the passage assumes the lineaments of Kantian enlightenment: it underlines our own capacity for sense-finding — our “own authority” — in leaving sway an emotional movement traversing the charged fear and anxiety of “cowardliness.” The body-mind is responsible, and the body-mind helps the reader claim the authority of her own coming-to-find-sense. So she claims her capacity to grow.

But even more so, this passage shows intra-personally what is needed for growing inter-personally. Kierkegaard’s summons addresses a reader and asks her to be open with herself about what she is feeling and to give herself the chance to be a person who has feelings and a view of her own. It is a credibly generous passage in this way — it gives the reader her own credence. The courage it thereby summons is the courage to be yourself by acknowledging your own personal outlook on life and the relationships in which you find yourself. It intuitively sidesteps the conformity of the normal to ask the reader to have the heart — even more than the guts — to feel for herself what makes her exist in a space where growth occurs, a home. Kierkegaard has shifted the discourse of the will — of guts — to the discourse of relationship — of the heart. And so the courage he invokes is the courage to give yourself as a whole person to a process both with yourself and, presumably, in your interpersonal life with others. It’s hard. This seems obviously more mature than the connotations to what Kant suggested, which were adolescent. Yet it doesn’t reject them — it deepens and develops them. Adulthood doesn’t repress adolescence — it gives it consistency and care.

Sometimes I feel as an academic that no one talks with me in my university or at this conference in airplane hanger style rooms of personless rows and dreary lights. We rush around with our work, focused in industrial theory. Can we think of ourselves as persons here?
My heart shrivels when I enter this place, it turns into a metal clock. *Tick tock.*

... ...

Why did I lose you so many years ago? Why have I always been off track in relationships? The fog of my metaphors mirrors my depersonalization. I wasn’t looking for a person, or seeing if I were addressed as one. There is a strange way in which I haven’t been showing myself, foremost to myself. This fear, it lives in the body like the echo off a metal table. *Ting*

You see, what I think is important in Kierkegaard’s address is its imaginative indication of an interpersonal address. This address does the work of awakening. It summons openness, prompts courage. Its effusiveness is giving—sentimental, yes, but also giving. It reminds us of a kind of intimacy that solicits our surfacing and showing our face. Kierkegaard’s authorial voice figures a scene in which someone is speaking directly to you, meeting you as a person. This formal dimension of the rhetoric is actually the crucial philosophical point. To use our own understanding, we must be awake to it, and to be awake to it, we must feel that we are persons, and to feel that we are persons depends on others speaking to us as persons, *wanting us to be*. Kant did not grasp this relational condition of enlightenment, I would say, the way enlightenment depends on community by way of its dependence on loving relationships, that is, a situation in which we are at home.

But before Kierkegaard, Rousseau almost did. One thing that is distinctive about Kierkegaard’s work is the way the body is always already interpersonal, or more technically, open to relational reasons. Rousseau glimpsed this point in his concept of compassion, but the interpersonal dimension of it is not focused except in the way Rousseau thinks of the voice of conscience. Because conscience is both a form of consciousness grounded in
the address and primarily bodily and emotive, Rousseau is very close to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s interpersonal body-mind seems prefigured in the understanding of conscience developed in Rousseau’s Émile in the *Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar.*\(^8\) Reason, the Vicar says, knows the good; only conscience loves it (Rousseau 1978, 290). Conscience is “the voice” and “the instinct” of the soul (286). Its acts “are not judgments but sentiments” (290). What these sentiments do is to express the place where, addressing oneself, the soul cares, where our being is at stake to us, despite how norms might claim us otherwise. Conscience calls us to decide on norms themselves, decide on decision, so to speak. In this way, it is personalizing. Even more, though, conscience speaks in a way that is loving. And it is this point that Kierkegaard develops. Kant, by contrast, picked up on the subjectivity inside Rousseauian conscience. But that subjectivity is weirdly impersonal without the loving voice.

What is interesting, too, is that Rousseau was interpreting ancient Stoic *oikeiωσις*: every living being’s disposition to care for itself.\(^9\) Our being is shot through with care for our being, despite the pressure to be normal. Yet what is *human* being when we care for ourselves truly and deeply? It is becoming and being a person. As Theodore Zeldin (1994) has shown, humanity’s history is increasingly intimate. Accordingly, *oikeiωσις* in the case of humans should be understood through the logic of being a person, and that means through interpersonal relationships.

In this way, we might say that being a person is prior to being normal, even though norms construct the way

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8 It is an interesting coincidence that the minister who writes the “closing words” of *Either/Or* examined here was said to be a religious man from an isolated country place—just as the vicar is said to be.

of life of people. The personal space around norms keeps them human. Foucault’s “critical attitude” might better be described as a loving one, something Lynne Huffer has suggested.\(^\text{10}\) By addressing his readers, Kierkegaard was using interpersonal connection to awaken the distinctly human οἰκείωσις of people. By stirring the person in each of us, he was throwing a wrench into the machine.

στέρνον, a storm in wondrous hunger

I have pointed to the body of Kierkegaard’s text already—the way its form of writing manifests and works his point, summoning in the form of its address the enlightenment—lower case “e”—he understands personally. I think it is interesting how focused this formal dimension of Kierkegaard’s writing is. It actually points to—or reaches towards—a location in the human body, where relational emotions—including anxiety—are commonly felt. It is important to me to state that this dimension of Kierkegaard’s writing is not as conceptually focused as other parts—I can imagine human beings who empirically differ from the descriptions Kierkegaard suggests. Yet for all that, there appears to be widespread shared experiences of what Kierkegaard does suggest about bodily experience. Sorting out these matters would take a different study.

For the relational matters Kierkegaard addresses, where does his writing point in the body? Kierkegaard says

\(^{10}\) Lynne Huffer, Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory (2010). Huffer’s emphasis, however, is on eros. Eros is too ambiguous relationally, however. It was conceptualized often in the tradition as a part of practical reason—of seeking some desirable. Relationships, however, do not admit of such objectification. They are interpersonal. Huffer has issues with the notion of the person, but I do not think she has been working with a relational understanding of the person. In fact, her lovely book, written so personally, suggests that she would value it.
that the “heart” is the place in the body where the relational logic he espouses resides. His is a metaphor, but it is also localized. We thump the chest, and in particular, the sternum to symbolize the heart with a gesture. Commonly, the biological heart quickens or breath increases or constricts as we near an avowal or a confession—the most personal matters. It is common to tell that someone matters in an especially personal way by the feeling the person leaves in one’s chest, not of fear or of agitation, but of excitement and longing. And this place in the body is felt cross-culturally to be significant. The psychoanalyst and phenomenologist Luce Irigaray also noticed this in her own work on relationships.11 There appears to be something in the human nervous system where the anxiety of connection tarries in the chest, or sternum. In what follows, I will claim that localizing this embodied center of connection—let us call it, of “relational reason”—helps one locate normative and relational drift.

“Drift” is the name I give to the garden.

A long time ago, I used to walk in Chicago for most of the day, setting out from the Loop and going in any direction that felt right into the North Side, turning down smaller streets I hadn’t seen before, sitting for a cup of coffee in the light, almost anonymous, sometimes writing notes as I went, walking down the long diagonal streets while the sun reflected off the windows of shops I could not afford, seeing women who were attractive and imagining what it would have been to have a normal life where I worked a job and we were married and one day would have kids, thinking how my twenties were so strange as a graduate student (whereas people I’d known in college who went on into business were looking like adults), eating a sandwich, thinking too much about some corner of an idea in Rousseau, or action theory,

11 Luce Irigaray, I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History (1995), esp. ch. 1. Cf. for instance in South Asia, the sternum is one of the seven chakras.
or phenomenology, walking more; finally, slowing down, I was too tired, took a train back, tucked into 53rd & Kimbark & collapsed into sleep later.

What interests me about Kierkegaard’s address to the heart is the way the address helps move the reader actually to engage with the emotional content of her life. Which content? Her discontent with being a person. I call this discontent “drift”—for its phenomenological and conceptual connotations regarding the problematic of enlightenment—lower case “e”—I have been exploring. Drifting is the main quality of this relational center pulsating in anxiety, excitement or longing to throw the normal into disarray in my mind, displacing me to regroup around what I feel makes sense to me as a person—as if, in the moment, I am coalescing as a person for the first time. Drifting leads me to begin to sense the conditions of my senselessness, that is, the senselessness of the normal here at this moment in this place and time. I didn’t think of it this way at the time; the academy was so impersonal. It normalized my alienation from myself. But then it was not set up to help me see trauma. When you grow up with trauma, trauma seems normal. Then so much else that should make us profoundly discontented and which we should want to reject personally becomes something we simply put up with unreflectively. I could not feel my fear and how much I hated being afraid for much of my adult life. In everyday language, drifting shows me that I am not at home in such a profound sense that I feel that I am dispersed or lost as a person, at times even that I haven’t yet been a person or feel that I cannot be a person under the conditions from which I’ve drifted. So—and this is the crucial point—drifting’s emotional content actually involves personal dignity as an experience, an experience in which we want to collect ourselves in our own person or show up as a person with others. As I’ve said, the heart is about openness, and the way to openness is errant and abnormal in its quality.
What I like about this area in Kierkegaard’s work is the way he links a conceptually necessary thing with a phenomenal experience that he actually tries to help his reader experience. Think about it. There needs to be a name for the emotional and personal zone that precedes collecting oneself personally. In this zone, we lose being gripped automatically by norms that can come under question but which at the same time structure our sense of what is possible. This zone is no longer unreflectively conformist, but it is not yet personal. It is prepersonal, eerie, unsettled, strangely exciting, expectant but unknowing, and many other blended emotions that circle around not being at home with oneself. This zone might appear suddenly or slowly. It might erupt in an anxiety attack or manifest itself over days of building aimlessness. It may appear in an elated feeling that you are not yourself, or perhaps even in wonder. There are many different ways for drift to appear. What matters is that we see it as a logical zone between conformity and collecting oneself personally.

Moreover, this zone has to be opened up for us to see how it is there. When we go about our normal lives, we don’t consider that we could be lost as persons. To do so would be to risk losing oneself. Yet without experiencing such a loss as a possibility, we cannot be free to decide on what we think is truly fulfilling. We stay lodged in the normal, perhaps fearing or pushing away the extent to which we—or important things in our life—are abnormal, unfulfilling, unloving.

Drift comes only from a relational capacity in which our entire person is at stake as it really only is in love. This was Kierkegaard’s insight. The embodied expression of its zone is a kind of storm-field in the chest. What builds in the sternum is the need to communicate or to relate. The key to the personal is being inscribed within the interpersonal in a way that allows one to be free while being open.
Voicing

I’ve done everything I can, and I can’t do more. I am listening to my body. The minute I said I could keep working on it, anxiety ran through me like a nova. I slept on it. I hoped it would go away. But it got stronger and stronger, until my limbs were filled with electricity, pouring out into the air around me in my apartment and my mind would not rest. My body told me. My body remembered.

A car flipping over and over on a bare and blinding road miraculously lands in a swamp on all four wheels.

I torn free of the rule

Kierkegaard’s summoning thereby goes beyond a focus on courage in Kant’s sense. Kant is still too focused on will, but the key to having a mind of one’s own is being free as a person. Accordingly, the relational needs to be addressed, not the practical. To be one’s own person is not simply—or even really—a matter of guts. It is rather a matter of being free to be oneself with others and with oneself. This is the basic experience and condition of love. Kierkegaard does not upbraid or cheer on his readers; he addresses them, and his way of speaking shows that he imagines himself caring for his reader as a person who deserves love and in so being seen is respected at the most basic point as a human being with dignity.\textsuperscript{12} I am interested in this address, especially as it clears our drift and, having been experienced in our bodies, clears into a realization about our becoming and

\textsuperscript{12} See the Latin provocare: to challenge forth by way of a call.
being a person. I am interested in what it is for us to actually talk with each other as adults.

The address comes from the possibility of home, from whatever habit or hope of free and genuine community we have inside us. I am thinking of Tarkovski’s Зеркало, of the mother running down to fix the imagined, mistaken word during her time in the printing press under Stalin. Rain is everywhere, emotions colliding. She did not have a community until her friends heard her word. But trauma interrupted even that.

The way I want to approach this topic is through the perhaps odd—in this context—topic of conscience. It strikes me that, even more than in the case of heroic anti-authoritarian Enlightenment subjectivity, conscience matters in the quiet, interpersonal realms of daily life when we are mature enough to actually speak with each other as people. What draws on our consciences—our responsibility for who we are? Isn’t it being addressed as a full human being, as a person? I am speaking of the form here, regardless of what calls us out (call that the “content”). The form has the structure of a voice speaking with us as a person. My thesis at this point is that Kierkegaard’s formal innovations try to express, and so invoke, the adult scene between two people where they actually speak with each other as whole

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13 It is common for people who have struggled with conscience to report how when they side with their consciences and commit to what makes sense to them, personally, they feel a great release, a calm, and a renewed clarity. They feel at home in the world. These feelings, moreover, coincide with a sense of enlightenment. In the calm following conscience, we are empowered to use our own understanding. After all, we just have, and in a kind of crisis. So the activation of conscience is the crucial scene of enlightenment, and to be an Aufklärer is to be conscientiously abnormal. We can search for home by using our own understanding. But the process begins in drift. Cf. David Shulman, “Non-saintly integrity in the South Hebron hills” (2014).

human beings, that is, as persons. And the result is that, in being addressed as a person, we open our consciences to being stirred.

Here is a typical invocation to the reader at the beginning of Kierkegaard’s most conscientious texts:

[My book’s] finally met that singular one… my reader…. It stretches out its arms….\textsuperscript{15}

Of course, this is funny. But in the form of this address, there is a memory of grown-up speech. \textit{Giving-talk, you might say}. Kierkegaard is modeling the form of relationship. Kierkegaard reminds his readers of a form of life in which they are at home, because the elementary relationship in it is loving. To people keeping anxiety down in a depersonalized existence, he holds out the possibility of becoming again more of a person.

Buber called this the “primary word.”\textsuperscript{16} He was talking about enlightenment—lower case “e”—very much in the Kantian sense. We might also call it plainly talking as adults with each other. It demands that you use your own understanding as you are necessarily exposed to another in your seeking to connect, your response to the call of a personal relationship with your own life as you become open to the presence of a person. That presence is intimated, or carried, in the \textit{bare form of the address}. Address, which causes drift, works because it carries the

\textsuperscript{15} Søren Kierkegaard, “Preface” to “Two Upbuilding Discourses” (1990). Translation modified.
\textsuperscript{16} Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou} (1999, 15ff). It is also interesting to note that Buber, who was steeped in the neo-Kantianism of the Marburg School, came up with this way of speaking of a word while his contemporary Mikael Bakhtin did too. Bakhtin’s most brilliant essay is called “The Word in Dostoevsky” (I have lost my photocopy, but I believe that it was a translation of Mikhail Bakhtin, “Dis-course in Dostoevsky” [1984], and Dostoevsky’s “word” functions very much like a primary dialogical \textit{relationship}. Bakhtin was also schooled in a similar neo-Kantianism during the same period.
primary word in its form—even more than speaking, we might say the address voices.

The point here is that we can help each other be ourselves as people by speaking personally to each other, that is, by talking with each other. This is an elementary, interpersonal form of “con-science”—“knowledge-with.” Or we can learn to listen to our personal consciences, which carries this form over in our lives, erupting through the moments where, built up, we have lost touch with ourselves as persons and come to a limit where what we thought made sense no longer does or where if we do not focus ourselves as persons, we will commit to something that compromises us.

Obviously, this hangs a lot of work on the form of communication. But the Arabic word for conscience helps in addition to the Latin root that I have already mentioned. Arabic speakers have a name for communication from chest to chest: ضمير. It is translated as conscience. The Arabic word is relational—it indicates a relation between one person and another, between oneself and God, or between oneself as struggling and oneself at home. And yes, this word is embodied in the sternum—from sternum to sternum. ضمير is often said with great earnestness, which befits the sense of personal responsibility in it. It does not communicate anything of content except what its form displays: you are a person to me—be a person. You count, and I do too. We are people, whole human beings. ضمير communicates the bare power of subjectivity, the “I can think” and does so through feeling, the “I can be.”17 The irony is that this is not egotistical. Quite the contrary: it opens up the space of a relationship in life, a sense of what could even make universal sense as a starting point.18

18 As in Kant’s categorical imperative. I do not have the space here to explain how this Kierkegaardian reading extends Kant’s point about sense from The Groundwork and The Critique of Judgment.
Kierkegaard’s voice in the passage just read is not to be understood based on qualities it has—loud, soft, elegant, trite, cute, sharp, relevant, etc. Obviously, it is comically sentimental, too. Still, it’s the kind of voice it is because of what it does: it addresses the “single individual” (redundant as that expression is). That is its function or use. That’s its kind. Such a kind needn’t be said; it is always, however, shown. The most provocative signal of Kierkegaard’s voice is not in the said but in the saying—in the repetitions, gaps, emphases, and silences. In the body language, the gesture, of the writing. In a kind of action that conveys the work of address. That work is not sentimental—it is basically moral and plainly humane.

What I have been trying to show you today is how this role of embodied, interpersonal address is just as much enlightenment—lower case “e”—as what Kant advocated. Perhaps it is more. It is certainly more mature, having surpassed some of the adolescence that Kant felt he had to address and which Foucault refined two centuries later. Communicating—the voicing of address—is the kind of saying where one tries to connect with another, seeking the vibrant openness in her in which she comes alive as a person. In terms of this talk, it is a saying where the sayer tries to connect with the point in

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19 Consider the morally beautiful writing, under pseudonym, in *Training/Practice in Christianity*. This work stages a moral-religious drama through the precise repetitions of expressions, the escalation of care in sudden “cuts” and in many other ways. Moreover, as Poole has shown in *Kierkegaard, the Indirect Communication* (1993), *Training/Practice in Christianity* is literally built with the architecture of his Copenhagen readers’ main Lutheran church in mind. The work is both heart-breaking and love-provoking because of the extreme “materiality” of the writing. Truly reading it with one’s own search for a world beyond evil, the text manages to carry one’s conscience through a process that reawakens one’s idealism and illuminates renewed possibility for moral relationship.

Post-structuralists have learned from Kierkegaard on this writerly point as well—Derrida more than most, and also Jean-Luc Nancy, although sometimes to excess. See the latter’s *The Birth to Presence* (1993).
the other where her engaged responsibility for her location in the space of norms will emerge—where called, she will emerge out of the shadow of the normal and move out from drift by collecting herself in talk together or in conscience alone. This means that we must use emotional intelligence to feel out where the emotional field of the other is, and so too with ourselves. We have to mind the body’s surprisingly clear language of feeling.

**Body language**

Perhaps we are not even talking about voicing or address anymore. Perhaps we’re rolling with body language. The entire body is the voice. Body’s vocal (χορός).

What I have been calling “voicing” refers to the interpersonal dimension of a text that engages—hooks onto—the response of the reader in his ضمير. With ضمير, responsibility for the norms of my existence crystallizes around my speech. ضمير is the locus of care in speech—the place where conscience emerges as a voice in our voices. Kierkegaard’s authorship (a) is a work in voicing and (b) is intended to locate ضمير in the reader. I think of this location as *eco-locational*, seeking the storm of vibrant space in another’s sternum that produces drift and nostos—the search for home.

Voice has gotten a bad rap in the last half century. Influenced by Derrida’s reading of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology* (1976), some might want to explain Kierkegaard’s fascination and use of the spoken word—even indirectly in his pseudonyms’ theatrics—as neurotic nostalgia for self-presence that attempts to repress existence’s contingency and our constitutional inability to be completely self-transparent. This interpretation would stress, for instance, how Kierkegaard repeatedly urged his readers to read aloud so that they might hear their own voices. The idea would be that hearing your own voice activates original presence, which itself serves to make up for the
contingency of meaning in speech. Voice then supplements the diffusion or scattering of meaning. φωνή “supplements” χορός. Even though one might not understand what one reads completely and might not gather the intention of the author, one still auto-stimulates oneself as a giver and receiver of meaning. According to this line of criticism, the problem is that such auto-stimulated meaning—much like Rousseau’s famous “supplement”—is empty. It’s the mere form of subjectivity without object. And hence it isn’t even subjectivity. And hence Kierkegaardian voicing cannot work to obtain meaning at all. Meaning is not obtained. In fact, Kierkegaardian voicing covers over the mystery of meaning. We mean things only with others and only by being subjected to the grace or tragedy of meaning in our contingent existences.

But when one reads aloud, one does not read to hear oneself read. One reads to capture the gesture or act of the reading. This act helps locate one in reflection, just as both seeing and hearing the words do. There are two processing systems working together. They help one triangulate the content of the writing—not fix it with certainty. Better located, one is slowed down to think more carefully, opened up to the context that comes with acting an imagined role (the “script,” so to speak, of this other), and one is better able to stop and go at the speed and ability of one’s own understanding. In short, reading aloud is part of the act of understanding. And as a means to that end, it is a form of response—not an auto-stimulation. Its goal is not certainty or “self-presence,”

20 “Phonos” is ancient Greek for “voice” and “logos” is Greek for “reason”, “understanding” or “speech”. Derrida makes much of Rousseau’s use of the word “supplement.”
22 Derrida explores Rousseau’s famous onanism as supplement: the suggestion is that Rousseau’s text itself is plagued by a constitutional ideological onanism. But why is masturbation empty? Derrida is oddly conservative here—and disembodied.
but engagement with the “outside” which is most simply expressed in my dealing with a text that was written by another: me (the object, not the subject!). There is body language in reading out loud, a body language that reminds us that we are not alone in the world, not even with ourselves.

On the other hand, what is true about the Derridian-inspired criticism is that speaking out loud does activate oneself as a being in time who cares and has a presence. Doing so is an extremely basic way of feeling what Rousseau called “the sentiment of one’s own existence.” But it is precisely such a sentiment enabling conscience to speak: the circuit of simple responding to the text helps build up emotion through body language, i.e., the simple body language of speaking out loud, of hearing the words as they pass through one’s mouth. This is the most basic affection of words—the trace of a human community of bodies, not of propositions. In this pull of words that are embodied again, one carries over the body memory of words spoken between people. Reading aloud therefore drifts toward—not self-presence but—reaching out into the space in common where care lives between people by virtue of the common being held open at all. Voicing therefore embodies you in the space of care—this vibrant spacing that emerges from the chest just as the voice actually does. Yes, this is purely formal,

24 See Rousseau, Emile (1978, 291) for a hint. The full argument would take too long to work out here. It goes like this: conscience speaks for amour de soi-meme most basically (an amour de soi expanded with pitié). The sentiment of existence is a first expression and condition of a truly functioning amour de soi. Conscience therefore speaks out of the sentiment of existence, “the silence of the passions”—this being echoed in the entire phenomenology of conscience on 291 and also in the Second Discourse discussion of “the voice of nature.” See also Jean-Luc Nancy, The Inoperative Community (1991), especially “L’amour en éclats” (“shattered love; bursts of love”).
but it is extremely important to a view of humanity that includes persons in the space of norms—singularities who organize our communication not semantically but in primary words, that is, in relationships where norms become human rather than abstract to people’s real lives and where everyone has the power to understand in her own way.  

So voicing is none other than a kind of body language. Here, I am shaking off an overly disembodied view of voice, namely, one that sees (not hears) voice as part of a narcissistic circuit bound up in a metaphysical pathology, as Derrida did in reading certain moments in the philosophical tradition to bring out their narcissism. But body is significant and significance is embodied. So, too with voice. 

Voicing is an extremely basic form of responsibility for the human kind of life lived in the space of what is meaningful to us personally and together. It is an activation of conscience within a context of communication. And this activation of conscience is tantamount to entering into one’s own process of maturing, as we have previously seen. Kierkegaardian selves become only with others.  

That is the deep and mature enlightenment point—lower case “e.” To the very stuff of the often abstract and always anti-authoritarian debates that the late eighteenth century considered Enlightenment—upper case

25 See Haagi Kenaan, *The Present Personal: Philosophy and the Hidden Face of Language* (2005). Also consider Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1997). Reading the prospectus of Kenaan’s book really “clicked” with this point about persons for me. As his commentator Karsten Harries writes, “Of course we experience persons. But the seeming obviousness of this fact loses sight of a problem that has shadowed our all too often inhumane age. Kenaan succeeds in showing how such blindness is tied to a widely accepted understanding of language and reality.” See the book’s dust jacket back cover.

“E-” it adds a register of personal intimacy and genuine, interpersonal relationships. What others do for us in plainly addressing us is to stir our own coming to terms with ourselves.

The Kierkegaardian idea is that your enlightenment—lower case “e”—begins when and only when your responsibility for the norms of your existence crystallizes around your affection in the vibrant space of an anxiety provoked—or remembered—through the bare form of community. In this philosophy, you become a person out of love which, unsentimentally and not-at-all romantically, is perhaps best found in plain talk with each other.

Plain talk

So I conclude. This is a conference on Kierkegaard’s journals, his way of marking time. The question I just touched on about how a solitary voice relates to itself is therefore redoubled. Yet Kierkegaard wrote his journals aware that they could be read by others. What place did Kierkegaard’s journals have in his everyday life?

It is possible that the journals manifested a form of what Foucault calls “the self’s relation to itself,” a form of “writing the self” that allowed Kierkegaard the human being to embody his words enough to be at home within his conscience. Being thus a person, he would strengthen his capacity to be in relationships with others.

Yet encouraged by Roger Poole’s (1991) study of Kierkegaard, I think it isn’t irrelevant also to imagine a man of flesh and blood,27 Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote at night ascetically, who wrote each manuscript three times and then spoke it out loud, each time, as he went—word by word—who spent a significant portion

of his days out in the streets walking and talking with the many people whom he knew. He was many-sided: loafer, neurotic, judgmental jerk, comic, sad—even desperate—man hidden behind philosophy and genteel manners, devout soul; brilliant wit, writer, and thinker; well-meaning person, hetero-normative male inflected by patriarchy, good friend, loving family member by all reports, rebel vis-à-vis the Danish State Lutheran Church.

Well, this man also kept a journal. There are bodily and soulful practices for someone dealing with trauma as well as for someone living a philosophical life. There are everyday and plain forms of enlightenment—lower case “e”—that continue the wish of the Enlightenment—upper case “E.” Far from being mainly a technique du soi in the service of critique, to echo Foucault,28 journaling was daily work in becoming a person. It was a prolegomena for a more humane reality. People grow up by learning to speak to themselves and by learning to speak with each other.

28 See Foucault (1996a, 1996b, 2012). See also Charles Larmore Les Pratiques du Moi (2004), winner of the Grand Prix de l’Academie Francaise for philosophy, 2004. These studies could provide a very useful starting point for a comparison between S.K.’s journaling and ancient philosophical practices of memory and “self-writing.” Such a comparison would allow one to further develop the “acetic” moment in Kierkegaard: the forms of training by which he “subjected” himself to the demands of enlightenment and the commands of his religion.